

California Biodiversity Council

Balancing Biodiversity Conservation with the Demand For Increased OHV Recreation Opportunities

*April 11-12, 2007
San Jose, California*

Meeting Notes

This was a common utterance at the April 11-12 California Biodiversity Council meeting on balancing Off Highway Motor Vehicle (OHV) recreation use with preservation of biodiversity. Education, leadership and collaboration were the themes of the meeting held in San Jose, which included a tour of two popular OHV recreation areas.

Council members toured Santa Clara County's Metcalf Motorcycle Park, and California State Parks' Hollister Hills State Vehicular Recreation Area. There was a marked change in perspectives and attitudes as Council members and others learned that these areas provided high quality family recreation, while enhancing bio-diversity through the preservation of open space and taking a proactive role in natural resources stewardship.

At Metcalf Motorcycle Park (Metcalf), members were introduced to a successful motorcycle park in the middle of an urban setting. Those who had the vision to develop Metcalf did with an eye for enjoyable OHV recreation and the protection of resources. With houses going up all around, the park is an oasis for wildlife. Metcalf has a unique Junior Ranger program taught by passionate and committed rangers at the park. Through the program, children learn about the different resources at the park and ways to protect them. They also learn about safe and responsible operation of off-highway vehicles.

Hollister Hills State Vehicular Recreation Area (SVRA) provided excellent examples of resource management practices designed to promote responsible recreation in a natural setting. In this 6000 acre park, the group learned how park staff balance OHV recreation with areas set aside for California red-legged frog and the California tiger salamander. From atop a knoll, the participants looked out to spectacular scenery and learned about vegetation management strategies employed at the park. These include re-routing trails, removing invasive exotic species, revegetation with native species and protection of both existing trees and new seedlings. The importance of good trail design and route selection were emphasized. Hollister Hills SVRA staff demonstrated how a well designed trail can serve two critical purposes; creating a fun experience that encourages recreationists to remain on the trail and also enhancing effective resource

management by reducing soil erosion. Later in the afternoon, attendees were treated to a four-wheel drive adventure in the upper ranch area. Development pressures from adjacent lands and the resource implications were discussed while viewing the rapidly expanding San Benito County.

New light was shed on the classic stereotype of an OHV recreationist as the tour observed visitors of all ages including families, a group of young women, and a few octogenarian riders.

As day turned into evening, the group moved next door to the park and while sipping a glass of wine straddled a major fault line which dissects the De Rose Vineyards. Here, a National Natural Landmark plaque was a point of interest on the wall of the “oldest existing winery” in California. After a fascinating presentation by representatives of the California Geological Survey, the group moved up the road to the Pietra Santa Vineyards. In the winery, the group enjoyed a delicious dinner while listening to Russ Ehnes, Executive Director of the National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council, who presented a program which provided a national perspective on OHV recreation.

The second day of the meeting focused on operational issues and included two expert panels discussing the wide-ranging issues associated with OHV use. Phil Jenkins, Chief of California State Parks’ Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division, provided the background needed for further discussion including the rapid rise in OHV recreation, changing demographics and adaptive design by vehicle manufacturers. The presentation cited statistics showing a 1,300 percent increase in SUV street legal 4x4 sales over the past 15 years, an 85 percent increase in registrations of dirt bikes over the past 5 years, and an 87 percent increase in all-terrain vehicle registrations. With the rapidly growing urbanization of California, OHV enthusiasts have fewer places to recreate, while at the same time demand is continuing to grow.

The first panel framed the issue of OHV recreation, particularly from an “on the ground” perspective and defined “issues” as trends, opportunities and challenges. Interestingly, issues discussed were not necessarily negative – just topics that should be addressed in some fashion in the next five years. The second panel featured solutions, best practices and the “art of balancing” OHV recreation and biodiversity conservation. Some of the specific topics discussed include:

- Tremendous growth in the sport
- Declining recreation opportunities and associated crowding and degrading quality of recreation areas due to overcrowding
- Lack of a land ethic in some members of the OHV community, and the need and opportunity to embrace new OHV recreationists to instill such an ethic
- Potential for increasing fees to support environmental stewardship

- The role of the environmental community in working with, rather than against, the OHV community
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- Encroachment on OHV lands by residential, industrial and military use
- The impact of displacing use
- The changing face of the typical OHV recreationist, including a growing presence by the Latino community
- The real cost of lawsuits
- The importance of family recreation in achieving community health
- The dollar and cultural value of volunteer services provided by the OHV community on public lands
- The need for leadership at every level

After discussing what was and was not working, every speaker concluded that education, leadership and collaboration were essential elements in addressing these important issues. All of the speakers noted that collaboration works, and that the land, biodiversity and OHV recreation all benefited from active engagement by stakeholders. They also noted that through collaboration, stakeholders are able to address issues in richer, more sustainable ways and offer more effective multi-objective management approaches. The diverse representation among the panelists resulted in an enlightening discussion addressing the theme of balancing sustainable, high-quality recreational opportunities while conserving biodiversity. Represented agencies and organizations ranged from the Audubon Society, California State Parks, Yolo County Parks Department, San Diego Off-Road Coalition, US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, District Conservation Planning Coalition, Friends of the Inyo Forest, Off-Road Business Association, Santa Clara County Parks and the US Fish & Wildlife Service. Lisa Buetler, from the Center for Collaborative Policy, facilitated the two panels. There was also a common acknowledgment that this issue impacts local, state and federal agencies, and will continue to be an issue that must be addressed in the future.

Many Council members expressed a new found appreciation for OHV recreation, and expressed interest in supporting some pilot efforts that focus on multi-objective management that enhances bio-diversity. There was a common understanding that two areas of focus should be providing OHV recreation opportunities in areas within reasonable proximity to the recreating public, and educating the OHV community as to available (and legal) areas in which to recreate. As such, two commitments were made for further action. One was to assist Yolo County in their efforts to further explore ways of addressing illegal riding in county creeks and the feasibility of establishing an OHV park. The inspiration for this action item came from the fact that government projects must consider critical elements in the initial stages in order to appropriately assess the feasibility and address in a timely manner all of the stages of planning and implementation should such a project proceed. Thus a meeting of a variety of

CBC members with experience in this area could help avoid pitfalls and ensure a smoother planning effort. The other action item addressed increasing public awareness of legal areas for OHV recreation (and thus hopefully reduction of illegal use). A commitment was made to expand the existing public OHV map to include additional recreational areas and make it available on the web.